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# THE CLASSICAL WEEKLY

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In the School Bulletin for December, 1907, is an article by the veteran defender of classical study, Dr. W. T. Harris, entitled *What Kind of Language Study Aids in the Mastery of Natural Science?* This article is to be commended to all our scientific brethren. It affords a most adequate defense of the study of Latin and Greek for all those students who expect to specialize in science.

Dr. Harris shows very clearly that in every domain of scientific research, as well as in the various walks of life, Latin and Greek terms abound to such an extent that in some departments almost the whole vocabulary is classical, and that from this point of view it is quite a mistake to regard Latin and Greek as being dead languages. I quote a part of his remarks:

No longer used colloquially for simple conversational speech, the classic languages, Latin and Greek, are all the more used for preserving the results of scientific observation and for literary expression of fine shades of feeling and distinctions of thought; and it is very necessary to get the elementary sensuous significations of the Latin and Greek roots, which one does in his three years high school study of Latin, in order to acquire a fine sense of the use of these words in scientific technique. It also makes the technical vocabulary as easy to remember as the colloquial vocabulary. The word *carnivorous*, for instance, has the root *carn* and the root *vor*, *carn* meaning 'flesh', and the root *vor*, to 'eat' or 'devour': the whole word meaning 'flesh-eating'. The lack of a feeling of the original meaning of the words produces the ludicrous use of language caricatured by Shillaber in his "Sayings of Mrs. Partington". Mrs. Partington is a type of the person who has no adequate sense of the original meaning of the classical derivatives which he uses. Uneducated colored people often furnish examples of speech of this kind. One of them, for instance, goes to a drug store and asks for a nanny-goat for a particular poison, meaning antidote. And Mrs. Partington said that "Total depravity was a very good doctrine if you could only live up to it". The Greek meaning of the word antidote is just as easy to remember as the name of the domestic animal to a person with a smattering of Greek, and the Latin meanings of total and depravity are equally easy to the one who has given some study to Latin.

The fact that what is called a complete English dictionary contains three Latin or Greek derivatives to one word from a Saxon or any other Gothic source shows us that to the educated man the liveliest part of his language, so far as science and literature and the higher order of things are concerned, is the Latin and Greek contingent. Any person

who had to learn botany or chemistry would find it worth his while to begin by a three-years study of Latin and Greek just for the benefit of these languages in his scientific education. So, too, for history or for poetry, and by far more essential, for medicine, the law, and divinity.

Dr. Harris draws attention also to the fact that even in our agricultural branches, as may be seen from the catalogues of our state universities, the course of study bristles with Greek and Latin technical terms. He quotes the following, agronomy, zootechny, agrotechny, rural economy, rural engineering, apiculture, viticulture, botany, zoology, pomology, olericulture, floriculture, horticulture, meteorology, mathematics, geology, physiography, biology, bacteriology, entomology, veterinary science, agrostology, embryology, cryptogamic botany, vegetable cytology.

It seems almost unnecessary in this day and generation to emphasize the value of what Dr. Harris says, but even our cultivated classes who may be supposed to know, in general, what education is of most value, are often led to despise the training in Greek and Latin, and to withhold it from their children. If their attention is drawn to the fact that so soon as they get outside of the commonplace in the realm of expression, their language becomes more and more classical, and that any one who is at all careful in his speech must get a great deal of satisfaction out of the play of synonymic distinctions, which is only possible when one knows the actual meanings of words, it would seem to be self-evident that they would choose for their children the study of ancient languages in preference to much that is offered in our crowded curriculum. My own experience proves that even children can be much interested in this side of classical study, and why should grown people have less regard for the ideal than children?

Dr. Harris expresses this dependence of our language upon the classical tongues very well also in the following paragraph:

It remains true, and will remain true, that for us Latin and Greek must be studied because they are still living in the English language, and are not dead languages; because they are living languages, not of the colloquial vocabulary of common sensuous experience, but of the scientific vocabulary; not only of the strict sciences like mathematics and logic and physics, but of the experimental and historical sciences, one and all, and because the char-

acteristic vocabularies and styles of the great literary writers of English are to be identified through the possession which they show of the fine shades of meaning as well as the possession of newly attained powers to express moods of the soul. Their refinements of taste, their lofty aspirations and subtle thoughts, are all made possible of expression by skill in using the Latin and Greek derivatives which reenforce the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary by a wealth of words three times as numerous as that derived from the old English.

### SAPPHO AND PHAON<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of any work of literature associated with the name of the greatest of women poets inevitably arouses a doubly eager anticipation. No one can fail to be moved by the remembrance that Sappho was, by general agreement, the greatest lyric poet of antiquity: her fame was next to that of Homer himself. And the fact that not more than two complete poems and a hundred fragments survive makes any new treatment of her work important. One complete poem, the Ode to Anactoria, remains because Longinus enshrined it in his treatise *On the Sublime*, as a perfect example of the height of eloquence. Another, the Ode to Aphrodite, which is perhaps complete, was preserved for a like reason by Dionysius of Halicarnassus; and the remaining fragments survive chiefly because of similar quotation by other Greek writers from Aristotle to Plutarch, and later. Something of the spirit of Sappho's complete work is preserved in imitations by Theocritus and Bion, Catullus, Vergil and Horace, and by other ancient poets. The fragments themselves—"the supreme success, the final achievement, of the poetic art", every word having "a peculiar and unmistakable perfume, a seal of absolute perfection and inimitable grace"—have inspired Byron, Moore, Tennyson, Rosetti, Swinburne, and other modern poets. They are collected in Theodor Bergk's *Poetae Lyrici Graeci*. A literal translation and numerous selected renderings in English are presented in Henry Thornton Wharton's *Sappho* (London, 1885, and later editions).

Concerning the life of the poet we know very little. It seems certain that she was of Lesbos, and had about her a group of maidens whom she inspired to music and poetry. Apparently she lived about the beginning of the sixth century B. C., at Mitylene; she was of aristocratic family, her brother Larichus being a public cupbearer. Fragments of her verses are addressed to him and to another brother; one to the poet Alcaeus; others to Cleis, a little maid, her daughter.

Sappho's conspicuous position as a woman poet, however, early gave rise to legend. The satiric comedy of the third century B. C. dwelt much upon her, as it did upon Plato and Demosthenes. The

old stories of Phaon and a leap into the sea were first associated with her name at this time. And there were numerous others, one of a happy marriage to a man of her own rank, a ripe old age, and an honored grave. The former tradition, however, prevailed until it became permanently fixed by the Latin Epistle of Sappho to Phaon, attributed to Ovid, and available in English in the translation of Alexander Pope (1707). This furnishes the foundation for the Sappho and Phaon of John Lilly, the Euphuist (1584); and of the Austrian poet Grillparzer's Sappho (1819), which still holds the stage and may be read in English in the translation of Ellen Frothingham (Boston, 1876). The German critic Friedrich Gottlieb Welcher (1816 and after) and, later, Professor Comparetti cleared away certain accusations against the character of the poet; while many critics have aided a juster view of her work by emphasizing her exquisite treatment of nature, music, poetry, and the cultivation of the spirit, as well as her supreme power as a poet of love. Gounod's first opera, *Sappho* (1851), and Alma-Tadema's paintings are characteristic tributes to her from the realms of art and music.

In Mr. Mackaye's play a prose Prologue relates the finding, during the excavation of the private theatre of Varius at Herculaneum, of a manuscript tragedy, *Sappho and Phaon*, by that author. In the Induction, the actors discuss their life, with one another, and their art, with Varius and his guests Horace and Vergil, before whom they rehearse a part of the tragedy. The Prelude, after elaborate stage directions, presents a score of hexameter lines, spoken by Prologus.

The scene of the tragedy proper, which remains unchanged throughout, except for the varied coloring of evening, night and morning, is a promontory, overlooking the Aegean sea, the sound of which is an undertone throughout the play. The setting is an olive grove, a Doric temple, an altar to Aphrodite, a fire-urn of Poseidon, and statues of both gods. The play is written chiefly in iambic pentameter blank verse, interspersed with short-lined lyrics and elevated passages in trochaic or dactylic hexameter. Yet other passages are in notably excellent sapphics. Act one presents Sappho's pupil Atthis, betrothed to her mistress's brother Larichus, and Anactoria, whom the poet Alcaeus has deserted to woo Sappho. Alcaeus quarrels with Pittacus, tyrant of Mitylene, another of Sappho's wooers, whose blow at Alcaeus strikes Phaon, a slave whom Sappho loves at sight. Sappho reproves Alcaeus for his inconstancy and Pittacus for his serenity, and buys from Phaon, as an offering to Aphrodite, a sea-dove he would sacrifice to Poseidon in order that his sick child may be healed. In act two Sappho, in the garb of her brother Larichus, with a key from Pittacus, unlocks Phaon's slave-yoke. Together they fly from the

<sup>1</sup> *Sappho and Phaon. A Tragedy.* By Percy Mackaye. New York: The Macmillan Co. (1907).